

Send In The Clowns  
Shakespeare on the Soviet Screen  
By  
Ronan Paterson

After the Russian Revolution the new government embraced the cinema with a passion which few other countries could match, Lenin himself commenting that "... of all the arts, for us the cinema is the most important..." (quoted in Taylor and Spring, 1993, ix). The silent cinema offered a medium which did not discriminate amongst viewers no matter which of the many languages they spoke from within the new Soviet Union. But while in the West silent films based on Shakespeare's plays were widely produced<sup>i</sup>, this was not the case in Russia, despite their country's long established fascination with Shakespeare in the theatre.

Immediately after the Revolution Shakespeare's position was uncertain, some asserting "...that writers of the old order would have no place in a classless community, which would require only classless literature, produced by its own writers free of the ballast of bygone days..." (Gibian, 1952, p24). But Shakespeare had powerful defenders. Alexander Blok and Maxim Gorky were strong advocates. Blok became one of the directors of the first theatre to be opened after the revolution, in Leningrad. When that theatre opened in 1918 *Much Ado About Nothing* was presented in its first season. Gorky called on young Soviet writers to create:

'...an image of the "teacher of the revolutionary rights of the working class", [and directed attention to] the practice of Shakespeare, in whose plays there are indeed many characters who speak out passionately and boldly in favour of new ideas giving an example by actions which set them above the canons of behaviour acceptable for their day and age... particularly..the gay heroes and lovely heroines of his comedies with their dauntless frankness in the face of their enemies and their readiness to stand up for their beliefs, if necessary by force of arms...'

(Gorky, *On Plays*, quoted in Samarin. 1964, p12)

The Comedies were also highly regarded by Marx and Engels. Marx stated "...that Launce and his dog was worth more than all German comedies put together..." (quoted in Gibian, 1952, p26) and Engels that "...there is more life and reality in the first scene of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* than in the whole of German literature..." (quoted in Shurbanov and Sokolova, 2001, p45). Shakespeare's plays, and particularly the Comedies, were thus assured of a place in the new Soviet Union.

When eventually film makers in the Communist countries, at times when the idea of adapting world classical literature for the screen was enjoying a heightened level of interest, began to make movies based upon Shakespeare's plays, they took a different direction from film makers in the West. Whereas in Europe, America, Asia and Africa films of the Tragedies greatly outnumber films of the Comedies, in Russia and the former Eastern Bloc countries the opposite is true. This begs a question as to why it should be so.

There are exceptions of course. The best known Russian Shakespeare films outside that country are those of Grigori Kozintsev, whose *Gamlet* (1964) and *Korol Lir* (1971) have been widely seen by international audiences, or Sergei Yutkevitch's *Otello* (1955), which won Best Director for Yutkevich and was nominated for the Palm d'Or at Cannes in the following year. But in the years between the end of the war and the dissolution of the Soviet Union the contrast between the Shakespearean subjects chosen by Western and Eastern Bloc film makers is marked.<sup>ii</sup>

The first Communist Shakespeare film was made in East Germany rather than Russia. In 1950 Georg Wildhagen filmed a musical version of *Die Lustigen Weiber von Windsor*, the play which Engels had admired so much. Based upon Otto Nicolai's musical version, the film script departs from the libretto, and while it retains much of the streamlining of the plot found in Nicolai's version, re-inserts quite a lot of the atmosphere of the play. The movie begins with strolling players arriving in a German town, and setting up a touring stage. Wildhagen almost immediately moves beyond the stage into a recreation of his lively version of the marketplace of Windsor. This replaces the actual opening scene which Engels had praised, but the film is aptly described by Pitcaithly as "...vibrant and bouncy..." (2010). The film works as a joyfull comedy, and Nicolai's music is tuneful and entertaining. Although Richert, (1958, p245) drew attention to the fact that a "... socially critical tone was unmistakably present in the film..." he praised it for avoiding "...heavy-handed communist propaganda..." (ibid). Some of the performances are really good, particularly Sonja Ziemann as Frau Fluth, and Wildhagen's direction is effective. At the end of the film the characters return to the stage in the marketplace. While there is no pressing reason for this parenthetical transformation, it was filmed only a short time after Olivier's *Henry V* (1946) had been seen in Germany, which used a similar framing device, set in the Globe in Shakespeare's time.

Wildhagen's film was one of the most successful offerings of the East German state film company DEFA<sup>iii</sup>. It ranks ninth in the all-time box office tables for East German films

(<http://www.insidekino.de/DJahr/DDRAlltimeDeutsch.htm>) and, as the play has never been filmed for the cinema in English, and rarely been produced for television, stands uncontested as an enjoyable cinematic version of Shakespeare's play<sup>iv</sup>. Despite the success of this first Communist Shakespeare film *Lustigen Weiber* was not immediately followed up. The grasp of the Communist party hardened around the film industry in the newly created DDR. Within a year of the foundation of DEFA the original film makers had been replaced as board members by political appointees. From then on two things happened. The rate of production dropped, and more overtly political subjects were preferred, but audiences in East Germany showed a continuing affection for *Lustigen Weiber*, rather than some of the subsequent more ideologically driven films.

The Communist governments, including Stalin himself, took a close interest in cinema. Stalin involved himself personally in the censorship of films, and made interventions, "suggesting" amendments to scripts. He had very particular ideas about the sort of heroes the Communist cinema should be portraying. There has long been a received wisdom that Stalin disliked *Hamlet*, and considered the hero to be too indecisive to be an example to Socialist Russia. This opinion was widely circulated by anonymous apparatchiks, although *Hamlet* was never explicitly banned. Many commentators such as Makaryk (20 Part II Chp1) talk of a "tacit" ban<sup>v</sup>, but his view has recently been challenged by Assay (2016) and others, but it is also the case that *Hamlet* depicts a world of usurpation, spying and murder. While one can speculate as to whether Stalin found the play too close to home, (his only recorded comment was that he considered the play to be "decadent". (Fleishman, 1990, p222), during his lifetime there were comparatively few productions of *Hamlet* in the Soviet Union. This is not to say that there were no productions at all. Sergei Radlov mounted the play in his studio in Leningrad in 1938, with music by Prokofiev, and as Assay (2016) documents, and there were also two productions in Belorussia as well as one in Voronezh and one in Vitebsk during the Great Patriotic War, but certainly *Hamlet* was extremely rare in Russia during this period. Following Stalin's death in 1953, and particularly after Krushev's "secret speech" to the Party congress in 1956, there was an increase in the number of theatrical productions as the political situation began, temporarily, to thaw. Stribny describes it as a "...Hamlet fever" (2000, p99), but Assay (2016) has questioned the scale of this. Among the new productions of *Hamlet* which did take place in this period the two most talked about productions were those of Nikolai Okhlopkov in Moscow and of Grigori Kozintsev in Leningrad, using Pasternak's translation, to emerge as a film ten years later. But while these theatre productions were able to ask some very pertinent questions about Soviet Russia, it was a different matter in the cinema.

The theatre audience is smaller, and even in Soviet Russia, tended to be drawn from amongst the educated, and therefore the more critically discerning. The mass audience, to be found in the cinema, had been carefully nurtured for decades to accept the propaganda they were being shown by a state regulated film industry. Something which could be shown to a comparatively small number of educated people could not necessarily be shown to a mass, popular audience.

Theatre need not be expensive to produce. It can be done with very few resources. Making a feature film, on the other hand, is a very expensive and complex logistical process. The cost is generally well beyond the reach of individuals. In the capitalist world there are many different places where production funding can be sought, but in the Communist world there was generally only one – the state. Very few governments are relaxed enough to give money to a film maker prone to criticising the very people funding the project, and certainly the regimes in the Soviet Bloc were not. Films in the Soviet Union and East Germany were funded to bolster, not question, the government line. *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, *Julius Caesar* and others, popular as subjects in the West, ask direct questions about power, legitimacy and the use of violence, perhaps too awkward to get past the apparatchiks and political committee men with oversight of the film industry.

Between 1955 and 1971 a number of Russian Shakespeare films were released.<sup>vi</sup> These included Yakov Frid's *Dvenadtsatiya Noch'* [Twelfth Night] (1955), Sergei Yutkevitch's *Otello* (1955) Lev Zamkovoy's *Mnogo Shuma Iz Nichego* [Much Ado About Nothing] (1956) Sergei Kolosov's *Ukroshchenie Stroptivoy* [Taming of The Shrew] (1961), Kozintsev's *Gamlet* (1964), and East German versions of *Much Ado* [*Viel Lärm um Nichts*] (1964) and *Twelfth Night*, [*Was Ihr Wollt*] (1964) also appeared. Kozintsev released his version of *Korol Lir* in 1971, and then in 1973 in Russia yet another version of *Much Ado* was made. In contrast with the output of Western film makers at this time, Soviet Bloc artists made noticeably more films of Shakespeare's Comedies than his Tragedies.

Two of these serve as examples to show the range of the Soviet cinema's approaches to the comedies of Shakespeare. *Ukroshchenie Stroptivoy*, directed by Sergei Kolosov (1961) is shot in black and white, and contains a number of rather studio – bound scenes, but features an excellent performance by Andrei Popov, who had previously played Iago in Sergei Yutkevitch's *Otello* (1956). The film opens with an extraordinary scene, where rather than the storyline featuring the tinker Christopher Sly, as in the play, the audience is shown a group of people in 1960s clothing sitting around a table while the application of Marxist theory to the story is explained. The speaker is Alexei Popov, the director of an almost legendary stage version, performed by the Central Theatre of the Red Army in 1937. Popov had originally directed his production at the height of the Great Terror,

but while the show trials were going on, as Bartoshevitch tells us, "...at precisely that same time theatres, motion pictures, vaudeville, music and painting were producing the kind of art that radiated unshakeable optimism, a kind of sunlit joie de vivre..." (2013 Pt I, CHP 5). "...never in the history of the Russian theatre were so many classical comedies ... presented as in the Thirties and Forties..." (ibid) After all, Stalin himself had said "...Comrades, life has become better. Life has become more joyful..." (1935, quoted ibid) Clearly this raises a number of tangential questions, but by the time the film was being made in 1961 Popov's production was venerated as one of the great productions of Shakespeare's comedy. As late as the 1960s Popov was invited to write about it for the collection on *Shakespeare in the Soviet Union*, published to celebrate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth. (Samarin, 1966, pp165-176) Kosolov's film deliberately invokes Popov's interpretation at the start of the film, something which he then underlines in casting Popov's son in the leading male role.

But *Taming of the Shrew* presents a number of problems for an avowedly egalitarian society. From the beginning the film shows Katerina (Lyudmila Kasatkinas) as being extremely unhappy in Baptista's house, completely at odds with the world in which she lives. She and Petruchio, played with a swaggering, bravura quality by Andrei Popov, recognise in each other a fellow feeling of being outsiders. The bourgeois characters of Padua hold little appeal for either of them. The taming itself is less abusive than in some versions. In Pitcaithly's words "...she uses aggression as a shield, and at first turns it against Petruchio, only to drop it when he shows her its effects by turning it back on her..." (2010,p163) they realise they love each other, and return to Padua for Bianca's wedding. At the wedding feast the most contentious moment in the play occurs when she is summoned into the wedding feast by her new husband and makes a public speech of submission. In the 1929 American version, Mary Pickford, as Katherine, famously delivers the speech then turns and winks at Bianca. In this version Kasatkinas enters, fully aware that this is a bet, nods in acknowledgement to Petruchio, and then delivers her speech. The other characters, who have been shown in a very unflattering light, behaving in a drunken and boorish manner at the feast, are stunned. Kate and Petruchio collect their winnings, then go out into the street to join the ordinary people of the town without a backward glance. The film moves in places a little slowly for modern tastes, but the performances are generally very good, and it offers a well-conceived interpretation which mitigates some of, if not all of, the misogynist elements which cause many modern audiences problems.

*Mnogo Shuma Iz Nichego* (1973), on the other hand, is filmed in lavish style, in Sovscope 70mm<sup>vii</sup>. The film begins, as many Shakespeare films do, with men galloping furiously on horseback. The setting of Leonato's estate is idyllic, so peaceful and tranquil that there is a pet faun wandering

unexplained through the scene on several occasions. As well as flocks of doves, peacocks and several Borzois, the animal population of Messina has many on-screen representatives. The costumes are Russian, rather medieval to begin with, and there is a large cast, with scores of extras. The portrayal of the central relationship is quite clear cut. Konstantin Rjkin's quirky Benedick nearly falls off his horse when he first sees Beatrice, clearly besotted. She, too, is clearly looking for him among the returning soldiers. The first exchanges between them convey an unavoidable sense that they are going to end up together, therefore some of the dramatic tension is missing. Galina Loginova is attractive, and has a nice quality for Beatrice, but looks very 1970s, particularly her hair. It is no surprise to find leading ladies looking modern in costume films, but this Beatrice goes further, spending a lot of the film in her ball costume looking more like a 70s version of Cesario in *Twelfth Night*. This happens partly because the screenplay sets the majority of the story in one night, with scenes usually spread over several days brought together into a lengthy section at the masked ball. The gulling of both Beatrice and Benedick goes on simultaneously, cutting from one to the other, which gives some advantages over the way the play operates in the theatre. The surrounding darkness and the party atmosphere make the half-heard gossip and the various mistaken identities plausible, but this is really Shakespeare played as if it were a musical comedy. For example when Benedick and Beatrice each overhear that the other is in love with them, they dance out their feelings. All four film versions of *Much Ado* made between Russia and the DDR during the Soviet years have a lot of music in them. In this version, for example, there is a section of wordless singing at the wedding feast which is used to show Beatrice and Benedick, seated at opposite ends of the table, are actually in harmony with each other even when they are protesting something else. This version is not the most musical of the four. That distinction is reserved for the 1983 version directed by Tatyana Beresantsova, *Lyubovyu za Lyubov*,. In that version large sections of the plot are removed to make space for more songs.

In *Much Ado* there are a number of elements which must be kept in balance. This film focuses closely on Beatrice and Benedick, and while that is a valid choice, it does lose some of the other enjoyable aspects of the play. Dogberry, Verges and the Watch are nicely drawn, and in fact rather poignantly, as a group of elderly former soldiers, and while they are very good in what they do they have been cut to the bare minimum. The contrast between Rjkin's slightly buffoonish persona as Benedick and the more serious element later in the film works quite well, Loginova is an attractive and feisty Beatrice and the villainous trio of Don John, Conrad and Borrachio are also effective. Certainly the masked ball works well in its elongation to cover scenes not normally included. The film

ends with an enthusiastic, if rather carefully choreographed, version of a carefree folk dance, which in some ways sums up the whole approach.

The film is beautiful to watch, and the 70mm frame filled with detail. It is a pleasant if undemanding interpretation, and it is not boring, a claim which lies beyond a large number of Shakespeare adaptations. It lacks some of the harder edges of the play, but captures the comic confusion and the celebratory aspects of the story. But the contrast with Kosolov's film is marked. This film is entertainment, pure and simple, and none the worse for that, but there is not the same sort of nuanced interpretation which is offered by Kosolov. On the other hand there is considerably more scale and spectacle in *Mnogo Shuma*, , and the lavishness of the colourful settings contrasts with, for example, the rather dull studio set used for scenes in the garden in the 1961 film. Both films are entertaining in their own ways, and both include moments of quality. They represent the different ends of the spectrum of Soviet films of the comedies.

Marx's liking for the Comedies, and Stalin's dislike of *Hamlet* do not explain why Soviet Bloc film makers made so many more Comedies than Tragedies. Russian and East German film makers were demonstrably capable of making both. But the ability to have a project approved for production involved a level of scrutiny by political committees for ideological content. In this context the tragedies ask a number of very difficult questions which could be difficult to place in front of broadly based audiences in totalitarian regimes. Classical texts have often offered Aesopian refuge for artists, although there is no suggestion that these artists were in any way dissident. Rather perhaps that "...classical texts offered a unique opportunity to break away from the clutches of official mythology, or at least to combine the requirements of the current political regime with those of honestly serving dramatic art..." (Bartoshevitch, 2013, Pt I Chp 5) The Comedies are of course perfectly valid in themselves, but the difference in this respect between Soviet Bloc film makers and film makers in almost every other culture in the world is so marked that it becomes difficult to view the phenomenon without looking for an explanation.

As to why they made so many films of *Much Ado* as opposed to the other comedies<sup>viii</sup>, it is worth considering that *As You Like It* also deals with awkward questions, such as those of exile and usurpation. *Twelfth Night* has the technical problem of identical twins, one male and one female, difficult to resolve in close-ups. The film maker can either, as happens in Trevor Nunn's 1996 film of *Twelfth Night*, and cast two actors who are patently not identical, and just have everyone say that they are, or do what Yakov Frid did in *Dvenadsatiya Noch'* (1955), and cast one actor as both Viola

and Sebastian. This then raises another question, as to whether that actor should be a man or a woman. Vadim Gauzner's television film of *Comedy of Errors*, *Komodiya Oshibok* (1978) had an easier task, given that both sets of twins are male, and it was more straightforward in film terms to have each pair of twins played by one actor. But in *Much Ado* men remain men and women women, without the complication of doubling roles, meaning that *Much Ado* is a play which, more than any other, enabled Communist film makers to celebrate the work of Shakespeare without unfortunate political scrutiny or compromise.

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## Online

Die Erfolgreichsten DDR-Filme In Der DDR, (No date) available  
<http://www.insidekino.de/DJahr/DDRAlltimeDeutsch.htm> , last accessed January 2015

## Films

*Gamlet* (1964) Grigori KOZINTSEV, USSR, Mosfilm

*Korol Lir* (1971) Grigori KOZINTSEV, USSR, Mosfilm

*Otello* (1955) Sergei YUTKEVICH, USSR, Mosfilm

*Henry V* (1944) Laurence OLIVIER, UK, Two Cities Films

*Hamlet* (1948) Laurence OLIVIER, UK, Two Cities Films

*Richard III* (1955) Laurence OLIVIER, UK, London Films Productions

*Macbeth* (1948) Orson WELLES, USA, Mercury productions/ Republic

*Othello* (1952) Orson WELLES, USA, ITALY, MOROCCO, Mercury Productions/Les Films Marceau

*Chimes at Midnight* (1965) Orson WELLES, SPAIN, Internacional Films/ Alpine Films

*Romeo and Juliet* (1968) Franco ZEFFIRELLI. UK/Italy: BHE Films/Verona Films/Dino de Laurentiis

*Romeo and Juliet* (1955) Renato CASTELLANI. UK/ITALY: Rank Organisation

*Julius Caesar* (1953) Joseph L MANKIEWICZ. USA: MGM

*Mnogo Shuma iz Nichego* (1956) Lev ZAMKOVVOY, USSR, Mosfilm

*Viel Larm Um Nichts* (1964) Martin HELBERG, DDR, DEFA

*Mnogo Shuma Iz Nichego* (1973) Samson SAMSONOV, USSR, Mosfilm

*Lyubovyu za Lyubov* (1983) Tatyana BEREZANTSEVA, USSR, Mosfilm

*Die Lustigen Weiber von Windsor* (1950) Georg WILDHAGEN, DDR, DEFA

*Dvenadsataya Noch'* (1955) Yakov FRID, USSR, Mosfilm

*Ukroshchenie Stroptivoy* (1961) Sergei KOSLOV, USSR, Mosfilm

*Komodja Oshibok* (1978) Vadim GAUZNER, USSR, Mosfilm

*Taming of the Shrew* (1967) Franco ZEFFIRELLI. Italy: FAI/Royal Films International

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1968) Peter HALL, UK

*Othello* (1965) Stuart BURGE, UK, BHE Films/National Theatre Production

*Macbeth* (1971) Roman POLANSKI, USA, C aliban Films/Playboy Productions

*Antony and Cleopatra* (1972) Charlton HESTON, UK, SPAIN, SWITZERLAND, Folio Films,/ Rank Organisation/Transac/Izaro Films

Appendix A: table showing production of Shakespeare films 1946-89

Rest of the World				USSR/DDR			
Film	Director	Year	Genre	Film	Director	Year	Genre
<i>Henry V</i>	Olivier	1946	History	<i>Lustigen Weiber</i>	Wildhagen	1950	Comedy
<i>Macbeth</i>	Welles	1948	Tragedy	<i>Dvenadsataya Noch</i>	Frid	1955	Comedy
<i>Hamlet</i>	Olivier	1948	Tragedy	<i>Otello</i>	Yutkevich	1955	Tragedy
<i>Othello</i>	Welles	1952	Tragedy	<i>Mnogo Shuma</i>	Zamkovoy	1956	Comedy
<i>Julius Caesar</i>	Mankiewicz	1953	Tragedy	<i>Ukroschenie Stroptivoy</i>	Kosolov	1961	Comedy
<i>Richard III</i>	Olivier	1955	History	<i>Viel Larm um Nichts</i>	Helberg	1964	Comedy
<i>Romeo &amp; Juliet</i>	Castellani	1955	Tragedy	<i>Was Ihr Wollt</i>	Bellag	1964	Comedy
<i>Kumonosu jo</i>	Kurosawa	1957	Tragedy	<i>Gamlet</i>	Kozintsev	1964	Tragedy
<i>Macbeth</i>	Schaefer	1961	Tragedy	<i>Korol Lir</i>	Kozintsev	1971	Tragedy
<i>Hamlet</i>	Geilgud	1964	Tragedy	<i>Mnogo Shumal z Nichego</i>	Samsonov	1973	Comedy
<i>Othello</i>	Burge	1965	Tragedy	<i>Komodiya Oshibok</i>	Gauzner	1978	Comedy
<i>Chimes at Midnight</i>	Welles	1965	History	<i>Lyuboyu za Lyubov</i>	Berezantseva	1983	Comedy
<i>Taming of the Shrew</i>	Zefirelli	1967	Comedy	<i>Gamlet</i>	Panfilov	1989	Tragedy
<i>Romeo &amp; Juliet</i>	Zefirelli	1968	Tragedy				
<i>Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	Hall	1968	Comedy				
<i>Shakespeare's Hamlet</i>	Richardson	1969	Tragedy				
<i>Julius Caesar</i>	Burge	1970	Tragedy				
<i>King Lear</i>	Brook	1971	Tragedy				
<i>Macbeth</i>	Polanski	1971	Tragedy				
<i>Antony &amp; Cleopatra</i>	Heston	1972	Tragedy				
<i>Hamlet</i>	Coronado	1976	Tragedy				
<i>The Tempest</i>	Jarman	1979	Tragi-comedy				
<i>Ran</i>	Kurosawa	1985	Tragedy				
<i>Henry V</i>	Branagh	1989	History				

<sup>i</sup> Estimated by Ball (1968) as over 250 silent films based on Shakespeare, by Buchanan (2011) as over 400.

<sup>ii</sup> See appendix A

<sup>iii</sup> Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA)

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<sup>iv</sup> The Nazis had made a film of a different musical version of *Merry Wives* in 1936, but this is inferior to Wildhagen's film

<sup>v</sup> "...Hamlet in particular attracted scorn in official discourse and was tacitly banned up until Stalin's death in 1953..." (2013, Part II, Chp 1)

<sup>vi</sup> There was also a film of the ballet of *Romeo and Juliet*.

<sup>vii</sup> Another version of *Mnogo Shuma* had been filmed in 1956, starring Yuri Lyubimov, subsequently an internationally acclaimed theatre director, as Pertuchio. DEFA had also made a film version, *Viel Larm Um Nichts* (1964)

<sup>viii</sup> Another version, a musical, entitled *Lyubovyu za Lyubov* came out in 1983